

Cultural Identity and Development

FELIPE M. DE LEON JR.

A serious impediment to the fullest development of Filipino artistic creativity is the persistence of a Western concept of art that still prevails in our academic institutions and in the minds of the so-called "educated class." This is the idea of art as a separate human activity—the idea of art for art's sake.

The theory of art for art's sake postulates the reduction of art to "purely" formal relations. In the hands of a sensitive artist, however, art does not actually degenerate into this condition. A true work of art is always a delight to behold. It has a vital charm that cannot be explained as a matter of pure form. It has life-enhancing qualities whose source lies deep in the mysteries of creative intuition and the human spirit. Form by itself cannot generate aesthetic pleasure.

In practical everyday life, form is utilitarian in inception and purpose. The unique and specific uses of a coconut grater and a plow make their forms quite distinct from each other. But paintings or sonatas are not utilitarian, unless we use them for commerce and profit. Neither do we eat works of art unless they are of the culinary variety. So what makes formal arrangements or relations in art interesting or delightful? Certainly the answer is not formalist. It is expressivist, instrumentalist, or better, intuitionist. Experiencing a work of art with a decidedly aesthetic character gives us pleasure, makes us feel more alive because it holds together separate parts into a seamless, integrated whole. This gestalt is satisfying to behold because it is an image, a reflection of the creative intuition within us, that which gives us power of perception or awareness itself. Without this integrative faculty, there is no perception at all. All art, we may observe, are made highly perceptible by their inherently holistic character.

This notion of art as heightened perception negates the distinction between so-called high art and folk or traditional art and may even bestow superior

status to the latter. A brief glance at the art for art's sake movement will show us why.

Since French writer Theophile Gautier popularized the doctrine *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) in 1832, other artists have taken it up, such as the Symbolist poets and painters in mid-19th century France and the English Aesthetic Movement of the late 19th century. An emphasis on form rather than content in art remained influential in the West well into the 20th century. We may observe that this emphasis on form led to the gradual diminution of "content" (in art, a metaphor for experience or levels of meaning), from Whistler's *Arrangement in Black and White* to non-objectivism, abstract expressionism, and minimalism.

My hypothesis is that this reductionism is synonymous to an inevitable process of dehumanization and fragmentation of life in Western society, as it became more and more industrialized and consumerist. Work becomes highly specialized and social isolation increases, stunting the growth of social consciousness or the expansion of human awareness. Materialistic and individualistic values gain an upperhand. In the hands of untalented artists, artistic production degenerates into a preoccupation with technique and showmanship. This is the sociocultural context of formalism in art.

As "content" gives way to "form" and even form is reduced to technical virtuosity, art loses much of its social relevance and importance. It becomes obsessed with its own devices and thus, intelligible only to its makers and art experts.

This is in stark contrast to folk or traditional art, where artistic forms act as the matrix for a host of contents representing many levels of meaning appreciated by the members of a cultural community. For instance, a Maranao *kukura* is a coconut grater whose practical use the family enjoys. Its association with the coconut certainly increases its significance, evoking sensations and memories of food, celebrations, and rituals. Its stylized *naga* shape is symbolic of a dragon or serpent in ancient Maranao folklore, and thus potent with meaning. The unimpeded flow of curvilinears in the okir design can be a metaphor for the movements of the Lake in Lanao, fluid social relations, and Islamic mysticism in Maranao life. Other elements of design, like color, further augment its levels of significance.

On top of all these contents, we find that the whole object exists within a highly aesthetic matrix of efflorescent spirals rhythmically flowing from a point at the base of the naga's head, which is also the emphasis of a climactic asymmetrical balance. Though dynamic in design, it has clarity of visual direction and harmonious proportions.

A similar multiplicity of meanings may be seen in the exquisitely artistic Paete wooden frame and Pahiyas fruit basket from Lucban, Quezon. In spite of their having practical, sensuous, expressive, social, ritual, and symbolic functions and values, their formal organization is not wanting at all. It is aesthetically as good or better than many outstanding examples of so-called fine art. Ironically, works like these are often labelled craft instead of art while works almost or wholly reduced to just the formal level of significance, like *Bird in Flight* of Brancusi or a minimalist painting of Rodolfo Gan, can evoke paeans from art critics! This is not to downgrade these artist's capacities. But the question can always be asked: how can creations with very limited values be given more prestige and importance than those with a broader and richer spectrum of meanings?

The situation is similar in Philippine music. Music among our indigenous and folk communities not only possesses aesthetic experience; it can be at the same time a stimulating physical discipline, tool for healing, vehicle for social interaction, ritual symbol, sensuous experience, mode of expression, a way of affirming values and beliefs, a form of intellectual exercise and entertainment. As Westernization progresses in Philippine society, however, these functions of music gradually disappear until only its value as entertainment remains.

Does this reductionism necessarily result in a higher degree of artistry (or aesthetic quality) in contemporary gallery art or music for listening? If the answer is no, and certainly this is the case, why then do we continue to labor under a seemingly perverse art theory that bestows so much honor to individualist artists but denigrate the living treasures in our cultural communities? Either we are cultural masochists or victims of a colonial hangover being perpetrated by our continuing miseducation.

From a Filipino cultural perspective, traditional art has a greater life-enhancing function because its aesthetic form speaks not only for itself but is a matrix for many other levels of significance. It is high art *par excellence*.

The only "fault" of the folk or traditional artist is to invest his work with the aesthetic and other values as well. He endows his art with as many uses and functions to ensure that it will benefit a wide community of men, women and children and promote communal well-being and harmony. He is not a *monospecialist* (i.e., exclusively devoted to one specialization) for the purpose of maintaining the broadest basis within his person of interacting and communicating with others in everyday life. This is why, for example, an expert gong player for rituals may be a professional dentist the rest of the time, or a master *kutyapi* artist may also be the favorite barber in his town. To the integral traditional mind, pitting individual

against society to raise the former's worth simply does not make sense.

The individualist, on the other hand, is always in competition with others and cannot accept harmony and cooperation as a way of life. He thrives on a sense of separateness from society. He views the mixing of values, uses, and functions in art as anathema, as if anything that truly promotes communal togetherness and well-being is an unnecessary evil.

Traditional Filipino and Asian art is multivalued and multifunctional whereas "modern" Western art either of the serious (elite) or the popular (mass) variety tends to be *monofunctional*, having no other value except the aesthetic, or having no other function except to provide pleasure and entertainment, especially the popular type. This is the reason for the broader social appeal of Asian art in general, as aptly stated by Ziauddin Sardar:

In the Western framework, it is unthinkable for a peasant—simply because he is a peasant—to appreciate Wordsworth, Shelley or Eliot. But if one stops peasants in Punjab and asks them about their favourite poets, they will not only defend their choice but recite numerous ghazals from beloved anthologies. In Europe, only a certain class of individuals goes to the opera. In the Indian subcontinent, however, *mushairas* (poetry recitals) and *qawwalis* (music concerts) are patronized by all classes in society. Similarly, as is widely acknowledged, there is no distinction in Asian art between aesthetics and utility. Beautiful art objects and items . . . are produced not just to be appreciated . . . but also to be used. Cultural expression and creativity in Asia have not been the privilege of a select class or group of individuals . . . All can participate in cultural expression . . . and there has never been such a concept as 'high' or 'low' culture. (Ziauddin Sardar, "Asian Cultures: Between Programmed and Desired Futures")

Perhaps the basic assumption underlying the integration of values and functions in Asian art, aside from the communal orientation, is that the human being is a being of many levels—physical, psychic, sensuous, emotional, mental, and spiritual—whose survival and well-being depends on the successful integration of these levels. This wholistic, rather than compartmentalized or monospecialist, view of the human being could be the ultimate basis of multivaluation and multifunctionalism in Asian art.

Applying this view to the arts considerably raises the status and value of many Southeast Asian traditional creations, which we tend to underrate by calling them craft instead of art. Why call attention to the craft aspect of traditional

art but focus on the art aspect of Western art when both involve art and craft? For instance, the *ikat* weaves of the Iban of Sarawak and T'boli of Mindanao are tremendously intricate and exceedingly artistic and, hence, should be commanding the same prices as the masterpieces of Van Gogh and Picasso. Yet, we bargain so much with their makers that they lose interest in continuing their practice—which is so time-consuming, requiring great skill and painstaking attention to detail—and find easier and more lucrative means of making a living. This situation obtains in many parts of Asia and is greatly responsible for the continued deterioration of our traditional cultures.

We need not demean the best of our traditional artists by treating them as if they were merely artisans or technicians engaged in a purely mechanical act not involving any creativity. We can begin to honor them by realizing that from an Asian, communal perspective our traditional artists are engaged in a highly creative process, producing each time an original work of distinct beauty and design yet holding at the same time a host of other values and meaning cherished by their communities. With every intricate work they finish, they offer us the highest kind of art, no less!

It is high time that we desist from categorizing art into high and low, or fine and folk. We can call both individualist art and communal art simply *art*.

In fact, if we examine many products of individualist artists today, it is their works that oftentimes border on the absurd and non-art. For, ironically, in their excessive concern for individuality, only pseudo-originality in the forms of manneristic conceit; overvaluation of trivial novelties; focus on the perverse, gross, and shocking; superficial, false or merely quantitative distinctiveness (e.g., commercial gigantism in the movieworld); technical wizardry and pyrotechnics; and other forms of shallow sensationalism is usually attained by monospecialist artists. For the moment art becomes the exclusive province of professionals, the creative-artistic resource pool is drastically reduced to that of the artistic sector within a much larger society or community. When this happens, the inbreeding that results will be extensive. For ultimately, the whole sector will be thinking alike and will no longer be able to achieve originality except superficially. And worse, because they are only artists and nothing but artists, the range and depth of their experience will necessarily be constricted. As the saying goes, and this is not just applicable to the artistic profession, art is too important to be left to the artists alone!

In saying this, we are not denigrating the artistic profession. We are only pointing out a disturbing phenomenon of the twentieth century, the cult of the professional ego (no doubt an offshoot of monospecialization or monoexpertise),

which is clearly a manifestation of the materialistic individualism of industrial society. Witness science advancing for its own sake no matter what the social costs, medical doctors ganging up on outsiders to protect the medical "establishment," and businessmen sacrificing valuable goods just to maintain enormous profits. Society becomes splintered into ruthlessly competing self-interest tribes of experts, each with its own god or king (celebrity figures such as Stephen Hawking in physics and Bill Gates in technology and business), church or temple (convention hall, opera house, museum, etc.), holy book (professional journal or manual), sacred language (jargon), and religious attire (business suit, white laboratory gown, etc.). Each tribe is after its own good alone. Professional advancement is the highest good. And financial success is the highest reward (a market of warring, competing tribes?).

Who then cares for society as a whole? It seems that with few exceptions, what we have in our midst are economists who formulate policies as if people do not matter, scientists who pursue knowledge uninformed by social considerations, artists who create for other artists and art experts alone, politicians who place party interests above all else, and officials more worried about self-preservation than their people's well-being. These things are common knowledge and much thought and study have already been made specifically on the "barbarism of specialization" (Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*). I will not dwell on these consequences any further.

What I would like to show is the paradox of the narrow specialist in any field (an expert is said to be "one who knows nothing else") who is apparently all-knowing, but actually naïve in everything else outside his own little field. What kind of art will a monospecialist in economics be able to comprehend and appreciate? Imagine a group of narrow experts or "elites" in different, highly specialized fields—particle physics, topology, neurosurgery, macroeconomics, and soteriology—all attending a concert of serious new music or an exhibit of avant-garde, conceptual art. It is almost certain that their expectations and responses will be naïve, lay, uninformed, raw, and impulsive, unless some of them have had some previous acquaintance with art. They will not even know how to react and what questions to ask. To be fair, the art or music specialist attending a lecture on particle physics will be similarly situated. We have a paradoxical situation, then, where the elites or experts in one field are also the mass or laypeople in all other fields.

(It is this elite/mass culture that is being rapidly exported by the industrialized economies to every part of the globe, causing widespread erosion of cultural knowledge in non-atomistic, more wholistic societies.)

A monospecialist in one field has no adequate organs of perception (*adaequatio*) for understanding and appreciating the finer things or even the first principles of another field, more so if the other field "advances" its studies to the highest level of specialization, sophistication, or unintelligibility. So what kind of poetry, for instance, will appeal to a most diverse group of experts? What programs for cultural advancement do we design for them?

Unless we can answer this question adequately, the business elites will continue to prey on the raw instincts (indeed, quite often vulgar and indiscriminating tastes) of other elite/mass professionals by providing them with a pre-digested, formula-oriented type of art that cannot promote genuine human growth—what cultural critic Renato Constantino calls *synthetic culture* or what is otherwise known as *mass culture*. The appeal of mass or commercially-driven art is to the lowest common denominator or basic instincts. Without adequate exposure, a cultivated sensibility or ready intellect for understanding the fine arts, people will simply gravitate towards sensational entertainments and gross physical pleasures.

To pursue our paradox once more, we underscore the inseparability of the elitism of narrow specialization (what we have labelled *monospecialization* or what Jacques Barzun terms *specialism*) and the mass or pseudo culture that it engenders.

Hence, notwithstanding the alleged triumph of the democratic way of life over other political systems, it is doubtful that the "will of the majority" has any bearing on artistic and cultural excellence. Box-office standards and television ratings are at best a compromise. Very rarely do they satisfy authentic criteria of creative and artistic excellence. In spite of the dominance of so-called "popular," consumerist culture in the United States, there is no assurance that it can match the creative vigor of "despised" aristocratic, monarchic or monastic regimes, e.g., Czarist Russia had Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, Pushkin, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Moussorgsky; medieval Europe left a majestic cultural legacy; the artistic exuberance of imperial regimes in China, India, and Japan is unquestionable.

The "will of the majority" (whether fictive or real) cannot be imposed on the minority, even through the pressure of obviously commercial strategies like "popularity" ratings and box office hits. Culture is a system of vital ideas and cannot be considered superior or inferior simply on the basis of the number of its bearers, unless we qualify these bearers to be the most creative, learned, and wisest of the population. The culture of ancient Rome was not necessarily superior to the emerging Christian culture during the early Middle Ages in Europe, in spite of the imperial magnitude of the former.

I am not advocating a return to despotism but certainly we should be able to formulate and implement measures of cultural excellence independent of

commercial success. Note that the millions of dollars the movie *Titanic* raked in are not a guarantee of its literary and cinematic merit. Neither am I suggesting the setting up of an oligarchy such as a body that will review cultural productions for their artistic merit before they are presented to the public. Rather, I would recommend a participatory approach to raising standards of artistic creativity and appreciation of art. The best way is perhaps for every person, regardless of his profession, to be engaged in artistic production and have a first hand experience of the creative process and artistic principles. Passive appreciation, through cultural awareness and literacy, though necessary, is not enough. Elite/mass culture dichotomizes society into producers and consumers of art, making the masses vulnerable to synthetic, or pseudo, culture. But the human spirit is essentially creative. Actualizing this creative potential is a prerequisite of social health and the refinement of artistic taste. Valid measures of cultural progress should take this into consideration.

We have noted that in traditional Filipino and Asian cultures, an integral philosophy of life ensures that the deepest strivings of the human spirit are given expression. People from all walks of life are expected to engage in artistic creation and performance. A farmer may at the same time be an expert puppeteer, a medicine man the best epic chanter, and a barber an outstanding lute performer.

The emphasis on narrow specialization and expertise in modern, consumerist societies—whether in the academe, the professions, or workplace—effectively bars non-experts from meaningful participation in productive cultural, expressive endeavours. People are reduced into mere consumers, into passive masses. A sharp distinction is made between the artist, creator, performer (the specialist, expert or elite), and his spectators or audience (laypeople, non-experts, or masses), between the active producer and the passive consumer—resulting in what we have termed elite/mass culture.

Powerful technical, economic, and political pressures effectively intimidate the masses into accepting the authority of particular individuals—artists, art critics, art historians, and other art experts—to create, interpret, and understand art. They surrender their power of artistic judgment and creativity to specialists, who, in the words of cultural critic Wendell Berry, are “people elaborately and expensively trained to do one thing.” The masses are conditioned to subscribe to what the specialists prescribe.

Narrow specialization—though arguably a prerequisite for an economic, consumerist society to succeed—is, by its very nature, detrimental to cultural creativity for it constricts the intellect. The active interplay and cross-fertilization of ideas within the mind of a broadly educated or well-rounded person, or interaction

among such minds, is the basis of creative thinking. Note that the greatest creative thinkers in the arts, sciences, philosophy, and religion throughout human history have been mainly non-monospecialists or "serious" amateurs. Einstein was a clerk in patent office, Gandhi a lawyer, Darwin an "undergraduate" in medicine and theology, Buddha a prince, Christ a carpenter, and Leonardo an intense enthusiast in the arts and sciences.

The stress on narrow specialization or expertise conditions people toward a non-productive orientation in all other fields outside their limited specialization. Many specialists cannot even entertain themselves. They have to hire other specialists to do it for them. In contemporary society, so much prestige is conferred on consumption, rather than production, of goods by the owners of capital, mainly through advertising. Thus, people who used to be active producers of cultural phenomena are now merely passive consumers, listeners, and spectators of such. Whereas work used to be thing of joy because it was a channel for creative expression. Now it has been reduced to labor and drudgery, alienating the worker from his spiritual essence.

More disturbing, however, is the modern phenomenon of mass production even of patently cultural products—such as electronic keyboards, flutes, meditation in-"ten easy lessons"-manuals—designed for people who either have lost their productive, creative orientation or are simply forced by socioeconomic circumstance to accept them. In traditional Asian cultures, no two *gamelans*, mats, or dresses are identical. In many Asian societies today, however, the increasing mass production of cultural goods severely limits the creative resource pool.

In traditional Filipino and Asian cultures, the participation of the vast majority of people in creative activities guarantees a wide diversity and richness of ideas. It also "immunizes" these cultures from a slavish imitation of foreign culture because the common people are the best affected by the external influences. The elites, on the other hand, because they have the means, tend to be the most exposed and vulnerable to foreign ideas.

We may summarize the above factors and conditions that discourage a Filipino cultural perspective and thus tend to inhibit Filipino cultural creativity:

- 1) The notion of art for art's sake, which heavily favors only a small, Western-educated elite and bars the great majority of our people equal opportunity for artistic expression, reducing them into mere consumers of the products of a few;

- 2) The very low prestige given to folk, communal, or traditional art

- 3) The reductionist nature of so-called "fine art" alienates the majority of Filipinos, who expect multiple levels of meanings and uses, from engaging in

artistic activity;

4) The overly technical and formalist emphasis championed by our artistic establishment makes art too individualistic and does not appeal to the Filipinos' highly relational, participatory, holistic, and intuitive mode which favors the extemporaneous, communal participation and much flexibility in technique, materials and forms;

5) Limiting art to the professionals and the elite drastically reduces the creative-artistic resource pool of Philippine society and militates against creative diversity and vitality;

6) Making art the exclusive province of highly-trained professionals produces Filipinos who mainly advance their professional careers rather than help build the nation;

7) Without meaningful participation in artistic creativity, the Filipino masses will simply gravitate towards cheap entertainment and gross physical pleasures, as one can clearly see in the mindless and tasteless noontime television shows in our midst. The best way to raise artistic standards is for every person, regardless of his profession, to be engaged in artistic production and have an intimate experience of the creative process and artistic principles. Passive appreciation, through cultural awareness and literacy, though necessary, is not enough; and

8) Rise of pseudo-culture due to gross consumerism and mass production of cultural goods designed to lure people into false and superficial artistic or creative involvements.

Having stated the main factors and conditions that inhibit Filipino creative imagination and artistic excellence, I would now like to say that any serious effort towards removing them or mitigating their effects would help make art a very positive unifying force for the nation.

Why is this so? Simply because the considerable revitalization of artistic creativity that will result is the best antidote to the dire lack of symbols of excellence in our country. Symbols of excellence are the best foundation of a people's pride in themselves. Pride in being Filipino begets commitment to the nation. Commitment to the nation, in a circular way, leads again to excellence. Pride, commitment, and excellence, according to anthropologist Dr. F. Landa Jocano, are inseparably the key to nation-building.

An important step towards restoring pride in being Filipino is embarking on a serious program for cultural awareness and education. Lack of knowledge about the Filipino cultural genius results in our inability to harness it as a resource for nation building.

Furthermore, since our educational system is highly Westernized, it follows that as one ascends the academic ladder, the more Westernized and alienated from his cultural roots the Filipino becomes. That is why the more specialized a Filipino's education is, the more likely he or she find his means of livelihood away from his community, perhaps in Manila or some other country. An Ifugao child who receives only a high school education is more likely to remain in his community than another who finishes college. And the reason for this is not just because the latter has greater work opportunities, but because his education is not culturally rooted in his community, especially if it is a rural, indigenous village.

Our educational system remains colonial rather than culturally appropriate. Many of our schools do not produce people who are highly resourceful, creative, and adaptable to a fast changing and extremely complex contemporary world. They encourage dependency, a job-seeking, employability mentality rather than originality of thought, entrepreneurial qualities, and self-reliance or native skills, knowledge, and strengths.

Our colonial experience seems to have conditioned us to seek rather than create work opportunities, to adapt rather than to innovate, and to conform rather than to lead. The captive Filipino mind, having been alienated from its creative roots, cannot generate economic opportunities within its native setting because of this alienation. The needs and values it serves are external to itself. We borrow alien thought and value systems and forms of expression and produce nothing but derivatives and clones, superficially and mediocrity. We forget that we can only be truly productive using our own thought processes.

The Power of Indigenous Thought

Harnessing our own minds, understandings, definitions, categories, and concepts is certainly to have confidence, power, and control over our own lives. Economic power naturally follows from this. For instance, if we worship alien ideas of beauty, whose art works, music, fashion models, and beauty products do we glorify and spend for?

If we do not see the virtues of our systems of traditional healing and medicine, how much do we spend for imported drugs, medical technology, and expertise? (Dr. Juan Flavio once reported during a Senate hearing that within the first five years of a serious health care program harnessing the resources of Philippine traditional healing and medicine, we could save as much as fifteen billion pesos in medical expenses.) In the Philippines, the expertise of a psychiatrist

schooled in Freudian thought has often been found to be ineffective for treating culture-specific mental disturbances that a local *babaylan* could cure in a matter of minutes. But we do not bother to investigate and document the basis for the *babaylan*'s effectiveness, so that the tradition she represents languishes and is often lost. The erosion of the vernacular medical knowledge means depriving people of cheap and well-tested methods of medical treatment and the implementation of new ones that most people cannot afford.

This reliance on our traditions does not mean, however, that we become blind to new and perhaps better ideas from other cultures, but our traditions should remain as the basis because they are in consonance with our psyche and our needs, containing wisdom tested through time. Likewise, ancient Chinese acupuncture, successfully blended with Western medicine, has been receiving a lot of worldwide recognition and scientific validation in recent times, earning for the Chinese not only prestige but a lot of income.

The Doña Victorina Syndrome

The moment we began to view ourselves through Western eyes, what we held sacred suddenly became worthless, our virtues turned into vices, and our strengths begun to be seen as weaknesses. Anything indigenous became a source of embarrassment and uneasiness. We would hide whatever is native sounding or native in origin. Centuries of being regarded as backward and inferior by the white colonizers engendered in us a collective self-contempt, a psychic malady I would term the Doña Victorina Syndrome.

The Doña Victorina Syndrome, a manifestation of acute inferiority complex, is disastrous for national development. It denies and confuses us about our identity as a people. A people without a strong sense of identity will have no psychic or spiritual center around which to organize their lives. For instance, the moment we identify with American values, ideals, and symbols, we begin to think as if America's concerns, problems, and solutions were our concerns, problems, and solutions. We begin to lose sight of our real needs, concerns, and problems, which are unique to our situation and require quite different but appropriate responses and solutions. Not only this, our sense of priorities becomes skewed, incapable of distinguishing between the essential and the frivolous.

There can be no national unity without a sense of pride in being Filipino. For how do we expect a Filipino to care and work for the good of the nation if he does not even believe in being Filipino? If at the slightest opportunity, he would eagerly migrate to other countries in pursuit of a foreign identity? If at the

slenderest sign of political instability, he will stash away his savings in a foreign bank?

The basis of collective self-respect and respect for each other—and thus of social cohesion and nation building—is always a sense of one's worth as a Filipino, a firm belief in one's own strengths and creativity. Such brilliant men as Jose Rizal and Ninoy Aquino laid down their lives for our country because they believed that the "Filipino is worth dying for." That is why we regard them as heroes. They are architects of national unity and salvation. We can achieve no less.

The loss of the Filipino sense of dignity and self-worth began with the advent of colonization, especially because of colonial education during the American period. Education in this country being relatively an elite privilege until the present, it is the Filipino elite who became the most Westernized and developed most a damaged self-image as Filipino. There is no such thing as a damaged culture, only a damaged self-image. If a "damaged culture" exists at all, according to a well-documented study done by Mahar Mangahas of the Social Weather Station, it is only among the Filipino elite, who has the lowest opinion of Filipino culture.

The underdevelopment of Philippine society, then, is fundamentally rooted in a chronic loss of Filipino self-esteem due to centuries of colonization and mis-education. Our low self-esteem as Filipinos borders on self-contempt, the results of which are:

- Doubt in the Filipino capacity for achievement;
- Perverse delight among Filipinos to constantly belittle themselves;
- Serious lack of respect or contempt for each other; and
- Instead of harnessing our culture as a vast resource of knowledge and wisdom for sustainable development, we squander it by wallowing in a negative self-image that is tantamount to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Doubt in the Filipino capacity for achievement, especially among the elites, cause blind dependence on foreign goods, concepts, techniques, approaches, and expertise (incurring a considerable drain on our economy). Perceiving our own limitations rather than possibilities mars our ability to rise up to great challenges and be inspired to achieve the seemingly impossible. Instead, we lower our standards so much that we are simply satisfied with good enough ("Pwede na yan!").

Perverse delight among Filipinos to constantly belittle themselves not only among each other ("Ang mga Pinoy talaga . . .") but worse, even

in the presence of foreigners or through the media, further lowers local and international expectations of Filipino ability. Particularly unfortunate is the tendency of media to insult our leaders instead of offering constructive criticism. The loss of economic, political, and social opportunities that this negativism brings about is incalculable.

A serious lack of respect or contempt for each other that almost borders on hostility, causing Filipinos to pull each other down, get ahead at the expense of the other (especially in our driving behavior or tendency to put down a fellow Filipino just to ingratiate oneself to somebody, especially a foreigner), and make Filipinos highly abusive and exploitative of each other. This makes many Filipinos bad managers of Filipinos. The Filipino elites, especially, usually in connivance with foreign interest, simply take advantage of their own people (e.g., paying foreign consultants inordinately higher than would be paid to a local consultant, non-remittance of SSS or GSIS collections by agency heads). Ironically, foreign managers who knew very little about our history usually have more faith and respect for the Filipino and thus can bring out the best in the Filipino better than many Filipino managers.

Filipinos are perhaps the worst self-bashers in the world. We are blind to our own capacities and idealize those of others, especially Westerners. If something is poorly made it must be Filipino. If it is well made it must be foreign. If it is a negative trait, it must be Filipino. If it is a positive trait, it must be non-Filipino. Even negative qualities that are characteristic of human beings anywhere are claimed by Filipinos for themselves, e.g., crab mentality, graft and corruption, lack of discipline, etc.

But what could be more corrupt and immoral than the Swiss banking system which guards in great secrecy the stolen wealth of other people and invents all possible reasons for not returning them to their countries of origin, the deceitful behavior of Americans when they pretended to be helping Aguinaldo win the war against Spain but in reality were secretly negotiating with the Spanish government for the purchase of the Philippines, or their imposition of military dictatorship and curtailment of freedoms during their colonial rule purportedly to teach us the meaning of democracy and freedom?

We can never erect a viable nation upon such self-deprecating and false concepts of ourselves that we habitually entertain in our minds. Instead of harnessing our culture as vast resource of knowledge and wisdom for sustainable development, we squander it by wallowing instead in a negative self-image that is tantamount to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"A people's image of themselves tends to become a reality," said Kenneth Boulding. If in our minds we think we will be defeated, we have already lost. If people fear the imminent collapse of a bank, they all run to the bank to withdraw their deposits and really cause the bank to collapse. If wealthy Filipinos or public officials lose faith in their own economy and stash away their savings in foreign banks or invest in other countries like what our SSS is doing, their loss of faith will likely be validated. Widespread expectation of an impending rise in the prices of goods drives people into panic buying and really causes a drastic increase in prices or an artificial shortage of goods.

A negative self-image, whether individual or collective, can cause untold social and cultural damage. If so, why do we tend to celebrate our defeats—like the fall of Bataan and the death of Rizal—whereas other people celebrate only their triumphs?

This Doña Victorina Syndrome, this psychic malady that afflicts Filipinos, prevents us from tapping our greatest asset for sustainable development: our cultural strengths and resources. This is especially true for the arts because traditional Filipino culture is a vast creative resource pool for artistic excellence. We abound in talent in all the fields of art.

The positive utilization of Filipino cultural strengths for effective governance and management, higher productivity, and promotion of social well-being is conspicuously absent in our institutions, whether public or private.

The biggest challenge before us then is to deconstruct the negative self-images and notions of ourselves we have imbibed through years of colonial misrule and miseducation. The foundation of this transformation is education through cultural awareness: *a workable, effective program of education that can make Filipinos more responsive and sensitive to Filipino dignity, needs, values, and cultural potentials and assets.*

We have nothing to lose by discovering and constructing the most exalted and inspiring images of ourselves, which are the pillars of national unity. Negative images, on the other hand, repel Filipinos away from each other and fragment the nation.

The arts provide the most lucid mirrors of who we are as a people, capturing the widest diversity and profound depths of the Filipino creative spirit. We must attempt to remove all possible social, intellectual, technical, political, and economic obstacles to the flowering of Philippine arts. For excellence in the arts is a powerful magnet around which national unity may evolve.